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ABSTRACT

This policy brief highlights the interrelationship between sports participation and teen pregnancy prevention, noting barriers that have prevented sports from being utilized in teen pregnancy prevention. Discrimination against girls and women in school sports persists 30 years after Congress enacted Title IX, and this prevents girls and young women from fully participating in school sports and sports programs not affiliated with schools. Research suggests that the discipline, strength, and self-esteem that sports fosters in girls and young women can play a major role in preventing teen pregnancy and that participation in sports is important in the lives of many young women who are at risk for teen pregnancy and who may lack other sources of empowerment (e.g., girls of color and girls from low income families). Although state and federal laws are clear about requiring equal treatment of girls and boys in sports receiving public financial assistance, the written and unwritten policies of many schools and sports programs are not. Recommendations for school administrators and personnel include: parents and other individuals not affiliated with the school must be proactive in ensuring girls' rights to participate in sports; schools and policymakers must ensure that girls do not "stand on the sidelines" during physical education; and sports programs should hire more women coaches and athletic directors. (Contains 18 endnotes.) (SM)

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Nancy Solomon
2002
California Women's Law Center

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CALIFORNIA WOMEN'S LAW CENTER

Policy Brief

GIRLS' PARTICIPATION IN SPORTS: AN IMPORTANT TOOL IN TEEN PREGNANCY PREVENTION

Introduction

Sports permeate our American culture.[1] In business, sports metaphors abound and individuals use sports outings to cultivate business relationships. We spend our leisure time watching and participating in sports, which provide a multitude of health benefits and the opportunity for social interaction. Sports activity at an early age also provides the foundation to succeed later in life, teaching us lessons in teamwork, goal-setting, leadership, and competition. One of the proven benefits of sports activity that has too often been overlooked, however, is the relationship between participation in sports and teen pregnancy prevention.[2] The California Women's Law Center (CWLC) provides this policy brief to highlight the interrelationship between these two issues and the barriers that have prevented sports from being utilized as an important tool in teen pregnancy prevention.

Discrimination Against Girls and Women Persists

Thirty years after Congress enacted Title IX in 1972 – a federal law prohibiting sex discrimination in educational institutions receiving federal funds – discrimination and stereotypes continue to prevent girls and young women from fully participating in school sports and denies them access to sports programs not affiliated with educational institutions, such as those offered by Parks and Recreation departments and private leagues. Given the relationship between playing sports and pregnancy prevention, discrimination against girls and young women in sports comes at a very high price.

Since its founding in 1989, CWLC has worked to prevent and combat discrimination against girls and women in sports:

- On March 17, 1997, CWLC filed a complaint with the United States Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights (OCR) on behalf of girls soccer players whose games were scheduled in the winter quarter, creating an adverse impact on the conditions of participation. Following an OCR finding of discrimination, the four school districts involved submitted a plan to rectify the inequality.

- In 1999, CWLC successfully sued the City of Los Angeles, resulting in the City's adoption of the "Raise the Bar" program, which requires gender-equity plans for City Parks and Recreation facilities.

CWLC has and will continue to advocate for the rights of girls and young women to play sports not only because failure to provide equal opportunities to females is against the law, but also because denying girls and young women access to sports denies them an important tool to prevent teen pregnancy.

Interconnected Benefits of Physical Activity

The discipline, strength, and self-esteem that sports fosters in girls and young women can play a major role in preventing teen pregnancy. Female athletes are more likely to have their first intercourse at a later age, more likely to use contraceptives, have sex less often, and have fewer sexual partners.[3] Not surprisingly, female athletes are more than half as likely to get pregnant as female non-athletes.[4]

Moreover, improved school performance, which has been linked to a reduced risk of teen pregnancy, also results from athletic participation.[5] Female high school athletes tend to have higher grades and standardized test scores and graduate at a significantly higher rate than non-athletes.

Overall, sports are a resource that can build confidence, improve self-esteem and body image, and decrease stress and depression among girls.[6] It is critical for educators, administrators, and lawmakers to understand the interrelationship of sports, decreased teen pregnancy rates, and improved school performance and to utilize these connections. By encouraging female participation in sports, we can initiate a chain of positive outcomes for girls and young women.

Population of Girls Especially at Risk

Discrimination and stereotypes continue to prevent girls and young women from fully participating in school sports and denies them access to sports programs not affiliated with educational institutions

Participation in sports is a needed intervention in the lives of many young women who are at risk for teen pregnancy and who may lack other sources of empowerment. For girls of color and girls from low-income families, however, significant barriers exist that hinder their participation in sports. For example, girls from economically disadvantaged families may not be able to afford expensive gym memberships or athletic apparel and equipment, and urban centers may lack public facilities and programs. Also, many girls and young women may need to supplement their families' income by working after school, making it nearly impossible for them to participate in extracurricular and/or recreational activities. Additionally, certain cultures may espouse gender roles that devalue athletic females.

Yet, research has shown the importance of sports to girls at risk of becoming pregnant. One study revealed that girls who live in poor neighborhoods are less likely to engage in sex if they are physically active.[7] Another study found that the positive effects of sports on grades were especially pronounced for Latinas, the group with the highest rate of teen childbearing in California.[8] For some, involvement in sports may prove to be the factor that breaks them out of the cycle of poverty, lack of opportunity, and early childbearing.

Sports are a resource that can build confidence, improve self-esteem and body image, and decrease stress and depression among girls

Sex Discrimination and Sports

Both state and federal law offer protection for girls and women against discrimination in education programs that receive public financial assistance.[9] Moreover, state and federal laws make it illegal to discriminate in other sports programs, such as those offered through Parks and Recreation departments and private leagues. Because participation in sports has been consistently shown to decrease the likelihood of teen pregnancy, eradicating discrimination is essential to reducing teen pregnancy. Generally, the law provides the following protections:

If we are serious about improving academic, social, and economic outcomes for females and preventing teen pregnancy, we must guarantee girls equal access to sports opportunities

Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 is the federal law ensuring that schools:

- Provide equal opportunities for male and female students to play sports;
- Treat male and female athletes fairly; and
- Distribute athletic scholarship money equitably among male and female athletes.[10]

California anti-discrimination laws similarly guarantee women and girls the equal opportunity to participate in sports free from discrimination, whether the programs are offered through a school, a Parks and Recreation program, or a private league.[11]

Although the law is clear about requiring the equal treatment of girls and boys in sports, the written and unwritten policies of many schools and those of other sports programs are not. If we are serious about improving academic, social, and economic outcomes for females and preventing teen pregnancy, we must guarantee girls equal access to sports opportunities.

Pregnant and Parenting Teens Have the Right to Participate in Sports

In addition to the legal protections against sex discrimination in sports generally, the law specifically protects the rights of pregnant and parenting teens to participate in sports. Under current law, schools must:

- Allow pregnant and parenting teens to participate in physical education classes or sports activities;[12]
- Provide a pregnant teen (or a student recovering from childbirth or a related condition) who cannot accomplish the requirements of the regular physical education curriculum with an alternative curriculum that will accommodate her condition and provide her with a physical education credit;[13] and
- Not require medical certification that the teen is able to continue participation in physical education classes, unless it is required of all students with medical conditions.[14]

The sex discrimination faced by pregnant and parenting teens in sports is particularly unfortunate, as these girls are already at greater risk for school disengagement and dropping out.[15] Moreover, when a school denies pregnant and parenting teens access to sports programs it also denies them:

- An alternative avenue through which to establish their self-worth;
- An identity-building activity removed from the dating scene;
- A bonding experience with other females;
- A source of empowerment; and
- A means to interact with supportive adult role models.

It is crucial that opportunities to participate in sports are made available to every student, regardless of the parenting decisions they make.

Making the Connection

Sports, for their overall benefits and the specific effects they can have on girls' and young women's sexual activity, are an important part of any campaign to address teen pregnancy. Teen pregnancy prevention programs, family planning advocates, champions of girls' sports, and governmental and non-governmental organizations alike must make the connection between girls' participation in sports and lower levels of sexual activity. The law insists that schools and other organizations offering sports to teens open avenues for girls participation in sports. These institutions must stop discriminatory practices that deny girls and young women access to sports at precisely the age when physical activity can benefit them most.

The sex discrimination faced by pregnant and parenting teens in sports is particularly unfortunate, as these girls are already at greater risk for school disengagement and dropping out

Recommendations

School administrators and personnel, as well as other concerned individuals, must act to ensure that girls are receiving an equal opportunity to participate in sports and that the interrelationship between sports and delayed childbearing is emphasized as an important tool in pregnancy prevention programs. Specifically:

I. Parents and Other Individuals Not Affiliated with the School Must be Proactive in Ensuring Girls' Rights to Participate in Sports

Unfortunately, schools too frequently discriminate against girls in sports, often by failing to take actions to remedy inequities in the opportunities and resources provided to students. Therefore, the activism of parents and other concerned individuals to remedy discrimination is crucial. Accordingly, individuals should examine the following three areas of inquiry to determine if schools are violating the law:

- Are girls being given an equal opportunity to play sports? To demonstrate an equal opportunity, a school must show that: (1) the percentages of male and female athletes are about the same as the percentages of male and female students at the school or (2) the school has a history and a continuing practice of expanding athletic opportunities for female students or (3) the school is fully meeting female athletes' interests and abilities.[16]

- Are female athletes being treated fairly? To determine if girls are being treated fairly, individuals should examine, among other factors: (1) the quality and quantity of equipment and supplies; (2) the scheduling of games and practices at fair times and in the proper season; (3) the financial support provided to male and female teams for travel; (4) the quality of facilities provided to male and female teams; and (5) the salary and quality of coaches hired for male and female teams.[17]

- Do female athletes receive a fair share of scholarship money? Although elementary and secondary schools generally do not offer scholarships, schools must provide male and female athletes with similar assistance in securing athletic scholarships for college.[18]

Moreover, individuals should examine the athletic opportunities provided specifically to pregnant and parenting teens. Are their physical education needs being fully accommodated? Are pregnant and parenting teens given opportunities to participate in athletics at the alternative schools they attend, for those teens who choose to attend such schools?

II. Schools and Policymakers Must Ensure that Girls Do Not "Stand on the Sidelines" During Physical Education Classes

Too often, young girls do not participate in physical education classes and simply "stand on the sidelines." Physical education teachers who ignore these young women's lack of participation in athletics are doing them a grave disservice. Girls are often socialized from an early age to avoid athletics because physical activity and competition is seen as masculine. Unfortunately, when this attitude is reinforced by school personnel the consequences for girls can be long-term, as early participation in physical education paves the way for girls' involvement in athletics at the secondary and college level. Accordingly, school officials must be proactive in ensuring girls' participation in physical education courses.

III. School Districts Should Adopt and Publicize Policies Supporting the Rights of Girls to Participate in Athletic Programs

School Districts should adopt written policies regarding the rights of girls to participate in athletics, including the rights of pregnant and parenting teens to engage in physical education classes. Moreover, such policies must be widely disseminated and included in training programs for all school personnel, particularly those at the front-lines of providing such classes and those who teach in schools for pregnant and parenting teens.

IV. Sports Programs Should Hire More Women Coaches and Athletic Directors

Female role models are crucial in encouraging girls' participation in sports. School officials should be proactive in recruiting female coaches and should ensure that once hired, female coaches are provided with salaries and resources comparable to those provided to their male counterparts.

Conclusion

Participating in sports not only provides girls and young women with a multitude of physical and emotional health benefits, but it also serves as an important tool in preventing teen pregnancy. Policy advocates and educators should consider the link between sports and teen pregnancy prevention in drafting and implementing policies and programs for girls and young women.

Teen pregnancy prevention programs, family planning advocates, champions of girls' sports, and governmental and non-governmental organizations alike must make the connection between girls' participation in sports and lower levels of sexual activity

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[1] As used in this policy brief, "sports" refers to a variety of physical activity, including physical education classes, competitive school teams, school-based extracurricular programs, and athletic opportunities offered through Parks and Recreation programs and private sports leagues.

[2] See, e.g., The Women's Sports Foundation Report: Sport and Teen Pregnancy, The Women's Sports Foundation (May 1998); Sumru Erkut & Allison Tracy, Sports as Protective of Girls' High Risk Sexual Behavior, Wellesley Center for Women (2001).

[3] Id.

[4] The Women's Sports Foundation Report: Sport and Teen Pregnancy, The Women's Sports Foundation (May 1998).

[5] A recent study in the Journal of Research on Adolescence found that for all racial and ethnic groups, being actively engaged in school is strongly linked to the prevention of teen pregnancy. Jennifer Manlove, The Influence of High School Dropout and School Disengagement on the Risk of School-age Pregnancy, Journal of Research on Adolescence, 8 (2), 187-220; John Holloway, Extracurricular Activities: The Path to Academic Success?, Education Leadership, Vol. 57, No. 4 (1999/2000) (citing Ralph McNeal, Extracurricular Activities and High School Dropouts, Sociology of Education (1995)).

[6] "Why Sports Participation for Girls and Women?", Women's Sports Foundation (2001).

[7] Sports as Protective of Girls' High Risk Sexual Behavior, Wellesley Center for Women (2001).

[8] See Empowering Women in Sports: Athletics in the Lives of Women and Girls, The Empowering Women Series, No. 4 (A publication of the Feminist Majority Foundation) (1995); Fact Sheet: Teen Pregnancy and Childbearing in California, The National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy (August 2000).

[9] Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 (20 U.S.C. § 1681); Cal. Educ. Code § 200 et seq.

[10] 20 U.S.C. §§ 1681 et seq.

[11] Cal. Educ. Code § 200 et seq.; 5 CCR § 4922(a). See also The California Constitution and the Unruh Civil Rights Act (Cal. Civ. Code § 51).

[12] 34 C.F.R. § 106.40.

[13] Cal. Educ. Code § 48205 (a) & (b).

[14] 34 C.F.R. § 106.40.

[15] Teen Pregnancy in California: Facts at a Glance; Get Real About Teen Pregnancy[4] (citing statistics from the California Department of Health Services (1998)).

[16] 34 C.F.R. § 106.41.

[17] Id.

[18] 34 C.F.R. § 106.37.

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For additional inquiries regarding this policy brief, please contact the author, Nancy M. Solomon, Senior Staff Attorney. CWLC thanks Avital Rosenberg and Windy Watson for their invaluable research assistance and comments in writing this policy brief.

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